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FEATURES EDITOR
BETTY ATTAWAY
896-2312
bettya@sunherald.infi.net

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Golden years

Biloxi resident, known for her wisdom, turns 105 this week

KAT BERGERON

THE SUN HERALD

Take one day at a time and don't borrow tomorrow's trouble.

This bit of sage advice has carried Lorena Bessey Mangin through 105 years of change, seven children and a passel of great-great-grandsons.

The changing world of has swirled around the Biloxi woman as she witnessed the introduction of household telephones and electricity—and such conveniences as automobiles, airplanes, computers and microwaves.

The town where she was born in 1893 has transformed from a sleepy fishing village to a "civilized" — that's her word — gambling sort. In this whirlwind of years, Mrs. Mangin maintains a tiny spot of calm, smiling as she recites another of her sayings.

*A wise old owl sat in an oak,
The more he saw the less he spoke,
The less he spoke the more he heard,
Why can't we all be like that bird?*

She practices what she recites.

"If anyone would ask my secret to living this long, I guess it would be, 'Just take one day at a time,'" said Mrs. Mangin, who will turn the grand age of 105 Wednesday.

To hear her family talk, Mrs. Mangin is a walking encyclopedia of proverbs and wise, often funny sayings.

So what does this centenarian think of her own impressive age? It's a bit like being full on a meal.

"Oh, I've had an ample sufficiency; Any more would be a superfluity."

Her hair is a gorgeous white, a sort of crown years. Her eyes, though much dimmed, retain their sparkle through glasses. The tuck is genuine and shakes her whole tiny frame. The voice is soft and warming.

But these are not all changes wrought by passing years. She's always been like this, her family insists.

"When you see her, you just have to smile," says Ann Lund, who has visited the Water Street home since she attended grade school with the Mangin children.

"I think her secret is moderation. She's gentle, quiet-spoken. I don't ever remember her raising her voice. You know, Mrs. Mangin was like a teacher, and she's still teaching." Proverbial teaching, no doubt.

"It's better to wear out than rust out," she'd say to those concerned about her busy schedule as she approached the century mark.

That was five years ago, and she'd already outlived her husband by 10 years. Now she is stronger, and a walker stands at ready by her



DAVID PURDY/THE SUN HERALD

Lorena Mangin recites poetry, long epic ones that she learned as a young woman. This week, she will be 105. About 1 percent of Mississippi's population is 100 or older.

easy chair for her rare strolls around the house, with the help of a son. Hearing has lessened with her eye sight, but communicating is not difficult. Just talk a little louder.

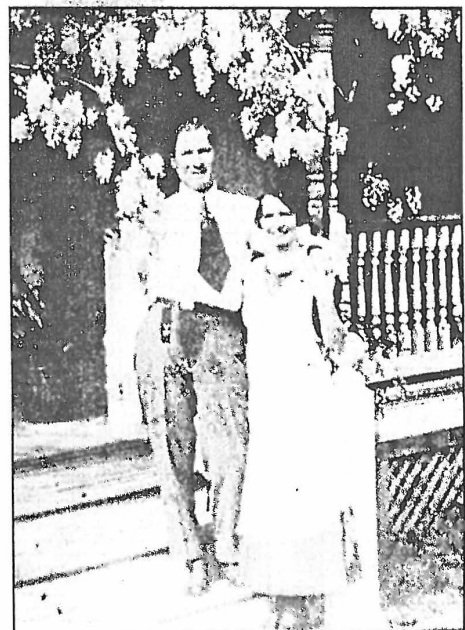
"She's still sharp as a tack," says Betty Melancon, daughter No. 1, who like the other siblings, is proof that sayings stick.

"We all revolve around Mother. She's the hub."

On Sundays and holidays, the Mangin clan

gathers at the house for dinner, sometimes five generations of them, to remember the days when the eldest of the clan fixed pot roasts and gumbo and, oh, her biscuits.

"I used to worry about what I'd cook for dinner," Mrs. Mangin laughs. "Now, I just sit here and they bring me the food."



COURTESY OF MANGIN FAMILY

A newly married Rena and Albert Mangin stand on the steps of their Water Street, Biloxi, home. At 105, Mrs. Mangin still lives there.

Many of the clan still live nearby, so gatherings are often and large. The family is joined by long-time neighbors and friends because that's the kind of house she has always run.

"Mother's joy of the simplest things is infectious," says Berthe Mangin, the youngest, a retired nurse.

"When we were growing up, there were always other kids here. They'd practice their instruments in the dining room, or they'd be in the boys' room, much like a big gymnasium."

The 8-room house was built around the turn of the century of heart pine and bought by the newlyweds in 1919 as their first and only home.

"I didn't think much of him at first, but he was friendly," she admits about her life partner, Albert Louis Mangin Sr.

"I was in ninth and he was in 10th at Biloxi High School when we met, and we got acquainted at school parties. He was just another classmate."

They married in their late 20s, and the babies started coming. Perhaps she followed her own proverb: Many hands make light work.

Mangin had opened a small electrical contracting business, and was the first to wire the Biloxi Lighthouse when it was modernized.

The difficult and time-consuming work of an electrician never made him wealthy, but the family remembers wanting for nothing. Mother sewed all the clothes, and there were two milk cows in a lot across the street and some chickens. The house was clean, good smells came from the oven, and the little flower beds were show-stopping.

Mrs. Mangin, who became a popular singer at Biloxi weddings, gave many couples a start with her alto renditions of "Oh Promise Me."

Most of the Mangin children took up an instrument, and their mother tickled the piano keys. And therein lies the fascinating first

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A grand age

Name: Margaret Lorena Bessey Mangin of Biloxi.

Birthdate: April 29, 1893.

Husband: The late Albert Louis Mangin Sr.

Children: Albert L. Mangin Sr. of Biloxi; Elizabeth "Betty" Melancon of Biloxi;

Edward J. Mangin of Biloxi; John "Jack" Mangin of Ocean Springs; Berthe Mangin of Biloxi; Margaret Gilmartin of Chicago; the late Dr. Charles Mangin.

Others: 23 grandchildren, 31 great-grandchildren and five great-great grandchildren.



The Mangin children gathered for a photo at the family home with their mother several years ago. From left at top are Berthe Mangin, Elizabeth Melancon and Margaret Gilmartin. Mid row from left is Edward, the late Charles and Albert Jr. Bottom center is Lorena Mangin and at right is John.

COURTESY OF MANGIN FAMILY

Golden

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chapters of her life.

Margaret Lorena Mangin is one of four children born to Elizabeth McCabe, whose father worked on Ship Island, and to Charles A. Bessey, one of the few to receive the Medal Honor in the Indian Wars.

Beginning with the Civil War, Bessey's soldiering with the 3rd Cavalry was mixed with music, working his way from head trumpeter to leader of the regimental band. He obviously passed on this love of music.

Although the Besseys traveled from military post to post, Elizabeth always returned to Biloxi to birth a child. Lorena, the oldest, was baptized at Nativity BVM Cathedral, the Catholic church where she later married and sang in the choir.

When her father's health failed, he retired and moved the family permanently to Biloxi. "Rena" as she is called by some, was 14 at the time. After high school graduation, she headed to what were called "normal schools" in Hattiesburg and Tulane in New Orleans, where she learned to teach.

The next seven years were spent teaching primary grades at some of the Coast's smaller schools. To get to Seymour School in D'Iberville, she walked across the Back Bay bridge; to reach a school in Pass Christian, she boarded the trolley.

Pay was \$40 a month, and one-fourth of that went to board.

"I taught just about every subject, well, except computer sciences," she says. "We'd never heard of such a thing back then."

Such statements stand as proof that at 105, "sharp as a tack" does apply.

When the marriage bug struck, the teacher quickly turned to mothering.

"I think that having many children might be easier than just a few because they help each other," she observes with usual humor.

The Mangin seven, most of them now retired and only one deceased, describe her as a loving mother and not a strong disciplinarian.

"Her strongest expletive, and used only when her patience with us was low, was 'Jerusalem,'" says Jack Mangin, the youngest who is a retired Ocean Springs insurance adjuster. "It is pronounced Ga-roo-SA-lum, and said with considerable vigor and



COURTESY

Mrs. Mangin at age 50.

volume."

A stern look and words, apparently, were enough discipline.

If you can't say something good about somebody, then don't say anything at all, she'd tell them. Your word is your bond, she'd tell them. Hope springeth eternal in the human heart, she'd tell them, along with haste makes waste.

Then there was this long one: *There's so much good in the worst of us,*

And so much bad in the best of us. It hardly behooves any of us, To talk about the rest of us.

At family gatherings, discussions are opinionated and lively, a trait they credit to Mrs. Mangin and her lessons in independent thinking. She remains well-rounded in her knowledge. Why, she's even an Atlanta Braves fan, able to cite statistics and players.

Of her other sons, one became a doctor, another became an electrician like his father.

One daughter, Margaret Gilmartin,

who lives in Chicago, mother's footsteps. *children.*

The eldest child, Al, from the Air Force a house where he was b watchful eye on his n

For her, the days of stepping and crabbing

Much of Mrs. Ma spent in her favorite e ting with friends.

Reading and watchin no longer easy with h sight, but her children she once did to them.

When asked the in tion, "Are there any r Mangin's quick "no" a that she's accepted ad with grace and humor follows with this:

My face, I don't min Because I'm behind i It's the folks out from That jar.